

Texas Historical Commission Staff (CJB), 10/18/89

18" x 28" Official Texas Historical Marker with post  
Comal County (Job #05288)

Location: Gruene Historic District, New Braunfels

GRUENE COTTON GIN\*

BUILT ON THE SITE OF AN EARLIER  
GRIST MILL, THE GRUENE COTTON GIN  
WAS CONSTRUCTED IN 1878 BY H.D.  
GRUENE. POWERED BY THE GUADALUPE  
RIVER, THE GIN WAS STEAM-OPERATED  
AND SERVED TO PROCESS THE VAST  
AMOUNTS OF COTTON GROWN IN THE  
AREA. THE GIN PLAYED AN IMPORTANT  
PART IN THE ECONOMIC DEVELOP-  
MENT OF GRUENE, A COMMUNITY  
DEPENDENT UPON THE COTTON CROP.  
THE GIN WAS DESTROYED IN A 1922  
FIRE, AND ONLY PART OF THE BOILER  
ROOM REMAINS. A NEW ELECTRIC  
GIN WAS BUILT AT ANOTHER LOCATION  
AND SERVED THE COMMUNITY UNTIL  
THE COTTON CROP WAS LOST TO A  
BOLL WEEVIL INFESTATION IN 1925.\*\*

(1989)\*\*\*

\*3/4 inch lettering  
\*\*1/2 inch lettering  
\*\*\*1/4 inch lettering

## I. Cotton Gin

In 1878 Henry D. Gruene built a cotton gin powered by the Guadalupe River.<sup>1</sup> He picked for the gin the site of an existing "Grist" mill that ground corn. The "Grist" are large stones used for grinding and are now sitting in front of the Gruene Mansion. A ramp led the water to a boiler room where it was heated by a wood furnace. Steam ran the mill. Here he ginned raw cotton from the share croppers farms. Ginning was not as involved back then because the cotton was picked "clean", that is without debris and seeds.

Henry had decided that the best way to use the land around his home and store was to share crop it. The land was fertile black soil characteristic of the Guadalupe region. It was perfect for raising cotton and was the area's main crop, although many kinds of fruits and vegetables were also grown. His 20 to 30 tenant families, primarily Mexicans and Germans, farmed 100 acre plots.<sup>2</sup> One third renters provided their own tools and generally paid cash for supplies. Henry provided the tools and mules for the  $\frac{1}{2}$  renters. They purchased their supplies on credit from the Mercantile Store that he founded in 1878. Here the tenants could purchase fresh vegetables, groceries, implements and hardware. In return, the  $\frac{1}{3}$  renters gave Henry  $\frac{1}{3}$  of their cotton crop, while the  $\frac{1}{2}$  renters gave him  $\frac{1}{2}$ .<sup>3</sup> The cotton gin burned in 1922, and building was demolished, but the boiler house remains.<sup>4</sup> No one knew exactly how the fire started. Many of the bricks were blown out during the fire. The openings on the main facade of the two and a half story brick structure have been filled and the deteriorated brick walls are much the same as they were after the fire. In 1976, the Gristmill restaurant opened in the boiler room and has been thriving ever since.

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<sup>1</sup>Hammer, Joe. Schlaraffenland: Gruene Texas, An unpublished term paper on file at the Archives Division, Texas State Library, Austin, Tx. p. 13-14.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. p. 14.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid. p. 27.

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## II. Gruene Community

The Gruene Historic District contains examples of late nineteenth century Victorian houses, as well as a few examples of mid-nineteenth century German colonial structures with Victorian additions. The town retains the ambience of a late nineteenth century cotton community, for there has been little construction since the 1920's. Located on the well-traveled road from San Antonio to Austin, Gruene served as a stage stop and by 1900 was a station stop for two railroads. Once the center for two to three hundred people, Gruene represents the ambitions of Henry D. Gruene, founder and developer of the town which bears his name.

The first people to settle in the area now known as Gruene, Texas, were German farmers, arriving in Texas in the late 1840's and 1850's with the Adelsverein, the Society for the Protection of German Immigration.<sup>1</sup> In New Braunfels, the first city to be surveyed and settled by the Society, town lots were quickly sold and new settlers moved north into the surrounding countryside where farm land was rich and fertile. About four miles northeast of New Braunfels, immediately east of the Guadalupe River, a community by the name of Goodwin emerged.

Among the first New Braunfels settlers arriving with the Adelsverein were Ernst Gruene, Sr. and his wife Antoinette, both of Hanover, Germany.<sup>2</sup> After their three children, Ernst, Jr., Henry D., and Joanna were born,<sup>3</sup> the Gruenes moved to Comaltown, an adjoining community between the Comal and Guadalupe Rivers.<sup>4</sup> Ernst Gruene, Sr. continued to acquire additional farm

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<sup>1</sup>Biggers, Don H., German Pioneers in Texas, Fredericksburg, Texas, Fredericksburg Publishing Co., 1925, pp. 21-25.

<sup>2</sup>Biesele, R. L., The History of the German Settlement in Texas, 1831-1861, Austin, Von-Boeckmann-Jones Co., 1930, pp. 11-138.

<sup>3</sup>Comal Co. Census, 1850, County Clerk, New Braunfels, Texas.

<sup>4</sup>Hammer, Joe. Schlaraffenland: Gruene Texas. An unpublished term paper on file at the Archives Division, Texas, State Library, Austin, Texas. p. 7.

lands near New Braunfels. In 1872 when acreage was no longer available in Comaltown, Ernst Gruene, Sr. bought land on the east side of the Guadalupe River. The deep eluvial soil was extremely adapted for the cultivation of grain products and cotton. However, it was Ernst, Sr.'s second son, Henry D., who was to develop a community, later known as Gruene, in this area.<sup>5</sup>

Born in 1850 in New Braunfels, Henry D. Gruene left the area in 1870 to join a cattle drive. Disillusioned after two years, H. D. returned to New Braunfels.<sup>6</sup> In 1872 he married Bertha Simon and built a home on the east side of the Guadalupe River in the settlement of Goodwin.<sup>7</sup> In January, 1873, H. D. Gruene bought his brother's half undivided interest of the property that the two brothers had jointly owned.

Cotton had been introduced into the area in 1852 and by the 1870's was recognized as the number one cash crop. With visions of converting the fertile land into cotton fields, Gruene advertised his need for sharecroppers. Within several months, twenty to thirty families moved onto H. D. Gruene's farm lands and he assigned plots of 100 to 200 acres to each. An educational facility was one of the earliest structures built.<sup>8</sup> Gruene conveyed land for the building of a county rural school, known as "Thorn Hill School" in 1874, and a more centrally located school was built in 1893. In 1878 Gruene established the first mercantile store in a frame building on the road from San Antonio to Austin. Here tenants could buy groceries, canned goods, implements and hardware supplies inexpensively and could buy on credit, if necessary, until harvest time each year.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid. p. 9.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. p. 10.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid. p. 12.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid. p. 12.

Not long after building the mercantile store, H. D. Gruene constructed a cotton gin powered by water from the Guadalupe River. The gin processed raw cotton raised by his tenants and other farmers of the area until the structure burned in 1922. Gruene also set up a lumber yard in conjunction with his mercantile store and sold long-leaf pine used in building barns and the three and four room houses of the tenant farmers.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Gruene built a dance hall and saloon in the 1880's. Providing entertainment for the tenants and surrounding farmers, Gruene Hall was the center of the community's social life.<sup>11</sup>

By 1890 approximately 8000 acres of land east of the Guadalupe was planted with cotton and foodstuff,<sup>12</sup> and lumberyard served the tenants, New Braunfels people and the rural vicinity; the community had its own educational system and blacksmith shop; and the Guadalupe River provided power for the cotton gin. Since the gin was centrally located in the county, it became one of the most patronized. In addition, H. D. Gruene became the community's first postmaster in June, 1890, operating a post office out of the general store.<sup>13</sup>

Transportation was an important factor in the success of Gruene. The mercantile store was located in the old original north and southbound stagecoach route, the main road between Austin and San Antonio. The Brown Tarbox stagecoach line, as well as other travelers, regularly passed through Gruene and the store provided a stopping point, where provisions and refreshments could be obtained.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid. p. 14.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid. p. 15.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid. p. 20.

<sup>13</sup>From a list of Texas postmasters compiled by Grover C. Ramsey, Austin, Tx.

<sup>14</sup>Bracht, Victor, Texas in 1848. San Antonio, Naylor Printing Co., 1931, pp. 82, 183.

By 1904 the success of the store caused Gruene to construct a large two-story brick commercial building as a new location for the store.<sup>15</sup> In actuality, the store also became a working bank, holding many farm mortgages as well as doing extensive farm financing.<sup>16</sup> Within a few years after building the new store, Gruene added one-story additions to each side to house the banking and post office facilities. The International and Great Northern Railroad built a freight and passenger depot about a mile west of the community in the 1880's and the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas line built another depot in 1901. The railroad facilities allowed H. D. Gruene to branch out into exporting cotton and grain products and importing goods for his general mercantile store.<sup>17</sup>

The community originally named Goodwin, finally changed its name to Gruene after 1903 when the U. S. mail rural free delivery route was established. The name was most appropriate for the economic system, the whole life of the town, rotated around the Gruene family.<sup>18</sup> H. D. Gruene and his family dominated the town affairs. He and his two sons Max and Othmar joined a partnership. Upon H. D.'s retirement in 1910, he created an estate with the two brothers as managers. For a while the store was known as the Gruene Brothers store. H. D. Gruene's daughters, Mrs. Fritz Hampe and Mrs. Ella Ogletree and their families all resided in Gruene. Ernst Gruene Sr. and his wife retired from their old home and farm on Rock Street, Comaltown, in 1898, to settle in their son's community and lived there until their deaths in 1914 and 1917.

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<sup>15</sup>Hammer, Joe. p. 20.

<sup>16</sup>The New Encyclopedia of Texas, Dallas, Texas, Texas Development Bureau, 1931. pp. 2138, 2968

<sup>17</sup>Hammer, Joe. p. 23.

<sup>18</sup>Hess, R. B., "Gruene Has A Heritage All Its Own," The Austin American, Aug, 2. 1962, p. 15.

In 1918 there were Spanish influenza epidemics throughout the United States. Max, only in his thirties, died of the plague. Soon afterwards H. D. Gruene discovered he had cancer. He traveled to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota for treatment and while there contracted pneumonia and died in 1920.<sup>19</sup>

H. D. Gruene, one of the largest landholders in Comal County, had had grand visions for the town he founded. In 1916 he and a surveyor, Mr. Marbach, had drawn the town off into lots and proposed streets. However, the project never got further than the maps.<sup>20</sup>

H. D. Gruene's death in 1920 marked an end to the period of Gruene's development. For a few years, the town continued its business ventures. In 1922 a fire destroyed most of the Gruene cotton gin, but within a few months a new electric cotton gin was constructed at a new location in Gruene.<sup>21</sup>

In 1924 a Chrysler agency, one of the first in the country, opened its doors across the street from the second mercantile store. Economic disaster struck the following year, however, when the boll weevil completely stripped the cotton crop. Not one bale of cotton was salvaged from the crop. The tenants fell into debt and many moved away.

No sooner had they recovered, when the Great Depression began another period of hard times. The 1930's saw a series of unfortunate events. The automobile that had helped bring prosperity and increased mobility to the people of Gruene in 1924 contributed to the town's decline a few years later by increasing the competition with the stores, jobs and amusement in New Braunfels. Declining cotton production brought an end to the tenant system and the closing of the store, the two railroad stations closed and the depots were later destroyed. After World War II the school house was moved just

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<sup>19</sup>Hammer, Joe. P. 26.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid. p. 27

<sup>21</sup>Ibid. p. 28

outside of New Braunfels to use as classroom space for the newly created Comal County Consolidated School until a new structure was built.<sup>22</sup>

The town did see some activity during this period of decline. Othmar Gruene, aided by Max's son, H. D. Gruene, II, carried on the work of the Gruene estate. A chain store, the Independent Grocer's Association<sup>23</sup> established their business in the old first mercantile store building where the Chrysler Motor Company had been.<sup>24</sup> Lifeless since 1938, Gruene's second mercantile store began housing a series of businesses in the 1950's. Finally, in 1966 the Hadlock and Fox Manufacturing Company of San Antonio, located their establishment in the two-story brick building. One of the four or five U. S. manufacturers of western style saddle trees, the business continues to operate out of Gruene and has helped to bring new life to the town.<sup>25</sup> The one business which continued to operate throughout the hard times was the Gruene beer hall.

Recently, an Austin developer bought the township of Gruene with plans to destroy most of the buildings in favor of condominiums and town houses. When interested preservationists approached him about the historical and architectural value of the community, he agreed to sell the historic properties intact and not disturb the area to be designated an historic district. Enthusiasm for the project spread so rapidly, that the houses have all been sold and restoration is in the final stages.

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid. p. 30-31.

<sup>23</sup>The Texas Handbook, ed. Walter Prescott Webb, Austin, Texas, State Historical Society, 1952, p. 741.

<sup>24</sup>Hammer, Joe. p. 28.

<sup>25</sup>Stilwell, Hart, "Hopes for Business Brighter at Gruene," San Antonio Light, Feb. 26, 1966, p. 2.

Mr. H. D. Gruene and Max's Victorian homes are now a bed and breakfast inn. The water powered gin is the Gristmill Restaurant. The original mercantile and lumberyard are shops and the second brick store is an antique store. The electric powered cotton gin is the Old Gruene Gin Restaurant and Guadalupe Valley Winery.

## SOURCES

### 1. Books

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### 2. Newspapers

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### 3. Records and Manuscripts

1850 and 1860 Comal County Census Lists.

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